

Clearing Up Some Misconceptions about John Wayne By Robert Tuttle

There are a plethora of stories and articles floating around today (and have been for decades) that John Wayne was a phony. That he was rabidly anti-communist, notoriously racist, a draft dodger, homophobic and hated horses. Quite frankly, I'm tired of it. Yes, I am a huge fan of John Wayne, and admittedly biased about him in some respects. But unlike his detractors, I am not so biased as to overlook reality. Was he perfect? No, but who is? And, the claims so often spewed forth by his detractors (such as those mentioned above) are about as untrue as they can be. Now, let's take a look at the facts.

John Wayne was rabidly anti-communist. The fact is, he wasn't. He was anti-communism, but that is a far cry from being anti-communist. In other words, he didn't like the communist ideology, but he didn't automatically dislike someone simply because they were a communist. Back in the 1950's, during what has since become known as the "McCarthy era" witch hunts, a promising young actor by the name of Larry Parks admitted under oath that he had been a member of the communist party. Parks also stated that he had renounced the communist party, but would not provide names of anyone he knew that were still members. In spite of his renouncement, calls to blacklist him rang forth throughout the conservative members of the Screen Actors Guild. Wayne, who at the time president of the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals, refused to join in. He took the stance that Larry Parks had renounced the communist party, and showed great courage in doing so. Wayne said that Parks' refusal to name names took great courage, and he refused to call for Parks' blacklisting. Wayne took a lot of flack for that, but he never backed down from his stand.

Marguerite Roberts who wrote the screenplay for True Grit was a blacklisted writer and a communist. When this was revealed to Wayne, there were fears that he would want her removed from the project. Those fears proved to be ungrounded. Wayne said she did a fine job, and he supported her work on True Grit. No, John Wayne was not a rabid anti-communist.

John Wayne was racist. This belief comes primarily from a statement he made during a 1971 interview with Playboy magazine when he said, "I believe in white supremacy until the blacks are educated to a point of responsibility. I don't believe in giving authority and positions of leadership and judgment to irresponsible people." But people tend to take this statement out of context, as he also said, "we can't all of a sudden get down on our knees and turn everything over to the leadership of blacks." Which is true, and it is not a racist statement. He believed in gradual integration, and I think an honest look at just about any black ghetto will support that view. He believed that blacks had an honest right to feel resentment toward and to dissent regarding their treatment. Hardly the view of a racist. He worked with many blacks, including Scatman Crothers and Roscoe Lee Brown, and got along quite well with them. One should also take into account that not only did he have black friends (like Sammy Davis Jr.), but he had no problem in casting blacks in his films (such as James Watkins, who played J.C. in the film McQ, and Sidney Poitier in one of his first films and cast by Wayne in a lead role), and was married to three Latin American women during his life. He did not dislike blacks for the sake of being black, and he tended to accept people based on their character rather than the color of their skin. So no, he

wasn't racist. He may have been racially insensitive from a politically correct standpoint, but he was far from racist.

It has also been surmised that John Wayne hated Native Americans. This misconception is generally based on a statement that he made during the same 1971 Playboy interview mentioned above. In that interview, Wayne said, "I don't feel we did wrong in taking this great country away from them. Our so-called stealing of this country from them was just a matter of survival. There were great numbers of people who needed new land, and the Indians were selfishly trying to keep it for themselves." A simple look at history will show that this very same sentiment was acted out by Native Americans themselves. Native American Indian tribes were fighting with one another long before the "white man" showed up, and it was not all that uncommon for one tribe to completely uproot another tribe. Take the Dakota Sioux, for instance. They were not always in South Dakota. Originally they came from North Central Minnesota. And what happened to the tribes they encountered in the path of their migration south? Well, they didn't just pack up and move away, at least not completely. Many of them were slaughtered by the Sioux, and in some cases entire villages were wiped out. In other words, John Wayne was absolutely right in what he said. It was a matter of survival, just as it was practiced by North American Indian tribes for generations before "the White Man" began settling America. If he said anything wrong in that statement, it was that "the Indians were selfishly trying to keep [the land] for themselves," because North American Indians had no concept of land ownership, and therefore really had no land to steal.

John Wayne was homophobic. This one actually surprises me a bit, as there are no quotes from either John Wayne or anyone else that support this. In fact, Rock Hudson, a known homosexual, co-starred with John Wayne in the film, *The Undefeated*. During the filming, Wayne knew of Hudson's homosexuality, and not only did he still make the film, but he was friends with Hudson and did not feel that he should be ostracized for his homosexuality.

John Wayne was a draft dodger. To set the record straight, John Wayne did not "dodge the draft." In fact, he was classified as "3-A" and he received a deferment due to his age and his dependents. Granted, he could have appealed the deferment, but he did not. And it is also important to note that he did not file for a deferment. It was Herbert Yates, the president of Republic Studios who filed (repeatedly) for a deferment, and he did not do so on behalf of Wayne. He did so in order to keep Wayne making pictures at Republic. I would also like to point out that it is incorrect to say, as some do, that Wayne "stayed behind and didn't do his part." The fact is, that Wayne received orders from the War Department to provide intelligence reports during his USO tours and visits to the troops near the front lines in the South Pacific, and he received two citations for his work during World War Two, one from the "War Agencies of the Government of the United States" for "Outstanding Service in World War II"; and the other from Major General William "Wild Bill" Donovan for "Honorably Serving the United States of America as a Member of The Office of Strategic Services" in 1945 (The Office of Strategic Services, or OSS, was the forerunner of the CIA). So, no, John Wayne was not a "draft dodger," and yes, he did serve his country during World War Two.

John Wayne hated horses. After starring in more than 80 westerns, and owning a ranch, and riding a horse to school as a child, this is another hard to believe myth, and yet there are those who readily believe it. In fact, it has actually made it into print, albeit into a rather biased book titled “John Wayne’s America, the Politics of Celebrity” by Garry Wills, and reiterated by Wills during a PBS Newshour interview with him by David Gergen. Here’s a snippet:

DAVID GERGEN: And yet in the end the idea of John Wayne was really a myth. You say that he hated horses, a man--

GARRY WILLS: Hated horses. Never rode except on the set, and never rode when he didn’t have to.

Now, while it is true that Wayne once told an interviewer that he did not especially enjoy riding horses, and generally didn’t unless it was necessary, this does not mean he hated horses. Nor did it mean that he was a poor horseman as some have suggested. In fact, the reverse is true and there is ample evidence to support this. Not only can John Wayne be seen riding horses in his 80+ western films, but he can also be seen riding horses in home movies taken at his Arizona ranch. John Wayne’s son Patrick once said, ““He was a terrific horseman. In *Big Jake* (1971) there is a scene at the beginning when the characters are introduced. Chris Mitchum rides a motorcycle into the scene and Dad is on a horse and it rears up and throws him. Later in film there is a chase and as they are passing by a bar a guy gets thrown out into street. Dad is riding a horse and the horse gets spooked and goes sideways. Dad stayed with it and stayed in the saddle, even though it was going sideways for ten feet, just an amazing display of horsemanship. It was all caught on film, but it had to be cut because it was inconsistent with the opening scene. A guy who could ride like that could never be thrown like he was thrown in the opening scene.”

(http://www.tonymedley.com/Articles/Patrick_Wayne_Reflects_on_John_Wayne_as_a_Father.htm)

In addition, although John Wayne was not a “real” cowboy (as has been pointed out by many), he was not a complete novice when it came to cowboy work. In an interview with Wayne, he once related, “I was hired on as an assistant for a George O’Brien western (I was actually hired as an actor but it was understood I would act as an Assistant – a scrounger, today they would call them a location manager). One of my jobs was to get 400 head of cattle into Blue Canyon which was 150 miles from any paved road. A preacher who had a little church on the Hopi reservation agreed to help me gather them. In gathering those cattle, we horsebacked into Monument Valley. ... It was during the making of this picture, in which I was assistant as well as riding in the posse, that I personally rode through Monument Valley.” The film was 1930’s *Lone Star Ranger*. [Tim Lilley, *The Big Trail*, Vol VI, No 1, June 1989] What this proves is, that not only did John Wayne visit Monument Valley long before John Ford had (thus debunking the myths that Harry Goulding told Ford about the valley, or that Ford had “discovered” it), but that he was herding cattle by horseback, and if that isn’t cowboyin’ then I don’t know what is.

So he may not have been a “real” cowboy as far as his chosen career path, but he was a real cowboy in every sense of the word.

So where do these myths about John Wayne come from? Well, primarily from two different sources. The first is that they are perpetuated by ignorant people who have never let the truth of any matter come in the way of perpetuating a damaging hateful lie. And the other group is liberals. But then, I repeat myself.

“According to Wayne’s recollection, ... (The film was Lone Star Ranger, Fox 1930.)

There are a lot of stories like this about John Wayne. He was notoriously racist, homophobic, a draft dodger and hated horses.

David Gergen, editor at large of "U.S. News & World Report," engages Garry Wills, Professor of History at Northwestern University and author of "John Wayne’s America: The Politics of Celebrity."

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GARRY WILLS: Hated horses. Never rode except on the set, and never rode when he didn’t have to.

http://www.pbs.org/newshour/gergen/march97/wills_3-20.html

Wayne was a vocal conservative, and his critics contend that the onscreen “Injun killer” was racist off-screen. In an infamous 1971 *Playboy* magazine interview, the Duke made insensitive comments about blacks and said this about America’s indigenous people: “I don’t feel we did wrong in taking this great country away from them. Our so-called stealing of this country from them was just a matter of survival. There were great numbers of people who needed new land, and the Indians were selfishly trying to keep it for themselves.”

http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/20070526_memorializing_the_deadly_myth_of_john_wayne/

In the crowning irony of the conservative’s career, Wayne finally struck Oscar gold for playing Rooster Cogburn in 1969’s “True Grit”—written for the screen by ex-communist [Marguerite Roberts](#), blacklisted in 1952 for refusing to inform on leftists.

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